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Controlling a whale shark mass tourism destination: new study investigates crowding and tourist expectations

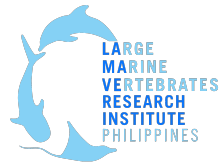
Cebu, 15 January 2020, [A new scientific study](#) by [Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute Philippines \(LAMAVE\)](#) and the [University of Victoria \(Canada\)](#) reveals that overcrowding is a significant issue for Oslob whale shark-watching tours. The study presents management interventions aimed at improving the tourist experience and recommends reducing tourist numbers to 500 daily visitors. These findings provide important management tools to support a [recent request by the Provincial Government of Cebu](#) for operators to implement controls on the number of people visiting the site on a daily basis.



Tourists gather around a whale shark being fed in the interaction area in Oslob, Cebu. Credit: Gonzalo Araujo|LAMAVE

Oslob, Cebu, Philippines currently hosts the largest whale shark tourism site in the world. In 2016, it received 310,000 tourists, generating approximately US\$10 million (PHP 505 million) in ticket sales alone. Unlike other whale shark tourism sites in the Philippines, the sharks in Oslob are fed ~350 kg of *uyap* (shrimp) daily (6 am to noon, year-round). The act of provisioning has created a guaranteed close encounter with a whale shark and has seen the site increase five-fold from its inception in 2012 (98,000 visitors) to 2018 (508,000 visitors). This rapid increase has led to management issues including potential negative impacts on the sharks (Araujo et al., 2014; Schleimer et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2017), coral reefs (Wong et al., 2019), and the tourist experience (Ziegler et al. 2018).

[This latest study](#) from LAMAVE and the University of Victoria and published in *Tourism in Marine Environments* investigated how crowding affected the tourists' whale shark experience and perceptions of the activity. The study found that Oslob is overcrowded in terms of the number of swimmers and severely overcrowded in terms of boat numbers. Over three-quarters of respondents felt crowded in response to swimmer numbers and 95% felt crowded in response to boats. Most



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tourists agreed that 1-4 boats were acceptable but more than 7 boats were unacceptable. Alarming, during an average day in Oslob in 2016, there were approximately 26 boats in the whale shark interaction area – 22 boats more than what most participants considered acceptable. This average has increased to 40 boats in 2018.

Overcrowding raises concerns for the whale sharks but also for the ongoing viability of the attraction. Respondents who felt crowded were less satisfied with the tour experience and less likely to recommend the tour. Tourists who felt crowded were also more likely to perceive the tour as having a negative impact on the local community, participants, whale sharks and the environment, compared to those who did not feel crowded. Those who felt crowded were more supportive of limiting the number of tourists and boats in the viewing area and regulating or banning feeding practices. The only potential tourism impact that was not significantly different between the two groups was their perception of the economic impact on the local economy.

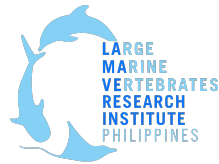
Working together to safeguard the whale shark and improve tourist experience

Results from this study provide management tools to assist the government and operators moving forward. Management should focus on limiting the number of boats and swimmers allowed in the interaction area at one time in order to improve the quality of the experience. This study recommends that only seven boats be allowed within the interaction area. This translates to 42 people in the interaction area at a time, and an overall carrying capacity of 504 people per day. Unlike, other whale shark interaction sites in the Philippines such as Pintuyan, where tour boats are limited to 1 boat per whale shark, Oslob interaction guidelines do not currently specify a maximum number of boats allowed within the interaction area at one time. Regulating the number of boats in Oslob is especially important given the small size of the interaction area (~480 m x 170 m) compared to other sites which are several kilometres in dimension. Zoning the interaction area and dispersing boats is another potential management intervention.

These numbers were shared with the Cebu provincial government, and other stakeholders including the Local Government Unit of Oslob, academe, NGOs, and Tan-awan Oslob Sea Wardens and Fishermen Association (TOSWFA), during the Technical Working Group meetings in late 2018. TOSWFA members have expressed their support towards management interventions aimed at improving the tourist experience and reducing tourist numbers. However, they have concerns that fewer tourists would mean less income and subsequently a cap on tourist numbers should be implemented with a new pricing policy.

Tourists are willing to pay more to swim with whale sharks

A 30-minute swim with whale shark tour in Oslob currently cost US\$20 (PHP 1000) for foreigners and US\$10 (PHP 500) for locals, [with daily ticket sales worth approximately US\\$22,000 \(PHP 1.2 million\) a day](#). To make the equivalent daily income with the carrying capacity of 500 visitors per day (based on 50% foreign and 50% local tourists) tourists would need to pay US\$44 (PHP 2,250) per person, a figure supported by a previous study by LAMAVE and the University of Victoria that found foreign tourists were willing to pay US\$45 (PHP 2,300) to swim with whale sharks in Oslob. To maintain the current price for locals (US\$10/PHP 500), foreign tourist ticket price would need to increase to US\$78 (PHP 4,000) per person – which is still US\$22 below the current average cost of whale shark tour experiences globally (\$100/PHP 5,000) (Dearden & Ziegler, *in press*). Provincial authorities in Cebu have noted the need to improve the quality of the experience before increasing tour prices.



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Swimming with a whale shark is a magical experience and a privilege, and tours to swim with whale sharks has transformed the lives of people across the nation. The value the country puts on this Endangered species should be reflected in the way tourists, local and foreign, interact with these incredible animals and the tourism is managed. When tools exist to balance economic development in our provinces, improve tourist experience, and implement stricter policies to safeguard endangered species, it is paramount that we work together to achieve this.



A whale shark is fed “uyap” in Oslob Cebu (Credit: Steve De Neef|LAMAVE);tourist boats in the interaction area (Credit: Inga Conti-Jerpe).

Notes to Editors:

The study by Jackie Ziegler et al., titled ‘Measuring perceived crowding in the marine environment: Perspectives from a mass tourism ‘swim-with’ whale shark site in the Philippines’ is published in the journal *Tourism in Marine Environments* on 18 December 2019 and is available here:

<https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/cog/tme/2019/00000014/00000004/art00001;jsessionid=34wdundj4nka3.x-ic-live-03>

If you would like more information or to arrange an interview please contact Sally Snow, email: [s.snow\[at\]lamave.org](mailto:s.snow@lamave.org) +639772055794 and/or lead author Jackie Ziegler [jackie.ziegler\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:jackie.ziegler@gmail.com)
Photos are available upon request.

Lead author Jackie Ziegler is a PhD graduate from the Marine Protected Areas Research Group at the [University of Victoria](https://www.uvic.ca/), Canada. Her main research interests are in the intersection between tourism and biodiversity conservation, with a focus on the marine environment.

Large Marine Vertebrates Research Institute Philippines (LAMAVE) is the largest independent non-profit non-governmental organization dedicated to the conservation of marine megafauna and their habitats in the Philippines. LAMAVE strives for conservation through scientific research, policy and education. For more information visit: www.lamave.org | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#).